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Foreign policy? It's developing



THE REAGAN REVOLUTION A STATUS REPORT *Third in a series.*

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WASHINGTON — While preparing to assume the presidency, Ronald Reagan confided to aides that should the Iranians fail to make a deal with Jimmy Carter to release the American hostages, he had a couple of ideas to bring them to heel.

That's what he likely had in mind when he publicly warned the Iranians that they shouldn't assume they'd have an easier time negotiating with a Reagan Administration.

One idea was to inform Tehran that \$1 million would be subtracted every day from its frozen assets for each of the 52 Americans remaining in captivity after he entered the White House.

The other would have given the United Nations a date by which it would have to effect the release; if the world body failed to meet the deadline, it would have to pull up stakes and leave the United States.

Advisers to the President-elect patiently explained that the United Nations couldn't produce, in the words of one of them, "a bucket of warm spit" on the hostage issue, regardless of American threats, and that if money had been Iran's primary concern the captives would have been freed months earlier.

This episode put the men immediately around Reagan on notice that in foreign affairs, he was a well-meaning innocent.

Furthermore, they knew he was determined that the overriding priority of his first year in office would be to turn the economy around, with dramatic changes in government spending and tax policies.

Thus it should have been clear to those setting up the government that the foreign policy/national security team around Reagan must be experienced, savvy, closely knit and sure-footed.

As is all too apparent, even to the casual observer, that is not how it turned out. In practice, the Administration has not produced the collegial Cabinet decision-making process it claims. Instead, there has been unseemly wrangling, unusual delays in selecting key personnel and making policy, public bombast and missteps.

Some of the fault resides not at the Administration's doorstep, but with headstrong congressional conservatives who have been fighting to put their men and marks on the decision process. But the smoothly organized domestic operation, with the President clearly at the helm, contrasts embarrassingly with the seeming disorder on the international side of the house.

After a six-month shakedown cruise, presidential insiders recognize they have a problem and are trying to do something about it.

Talks with a score of well-placed officials and specialists in and out of government suggest the following diagnosis:

- The President and his White House inner circle are intelligent enough, but have been preoccupied with domestic issues and have very little experience or feel for foreign affairs. Reagan particularly must be drawn more directly into the policy-making process so decisions can be seen as his, and final.

- Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig, after an initial grab for supremacy on every issue with a foreign aspect, including trade and aid, has had his knuckles so sternly rapped that he understands he must be more of a team player to survive.

- No one yet has similarly rapped the knuckles of Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and his crew, who continue to challenge policies even after decisions have been made, as was the case on the pledge to enter substantive negotiations this fall with the Soviets on medium-range missiles in Europe.

- The National Security Council process under Richard V. Allen is widely seen as a major disappointment, sometimes slowing, skewing and diluting decision-making,

rather than focusing and expediting clear policy choices. Allen's role is being downgraded; he no longer has daily access to the President, for example.

Now that Reagan has achieved a series of domestic triumphs on Capitol Hill, insiders say he plans to devote considerably more time to foreign policy.

First, three hours a week, twice the previous allotment of time, will henceforth be blocked out for formal National Security Council meetings chaired by the President.

Further, the intention is to have three National Security Planning Group meetings a week, which Reagan also chairs, in which he will hold more informal discussions of key issues with a roundtable consisting of Vice President George Bush, Haig, Weinberger, Allen, Edwin Meese 3d and James Baker 3d and such other top officials as might be knowledgeable on a specific issue under discussion.

At the first such meeting recently, 15 minutes each were devoted to East-West trade, aid to Poland and an arms package for Pakistan. The Treasury Secretary and the Budget Director were invited because of the agenda.

In addition, sources say that presidential counselor Meese is conducting a comprehensive review of the policy-making machinery to see what other changes ought to be made.

In contrast to the early days of the Carter Administration, the new bunch has not tried to change everything overnight. Within a few months of assuming office, Carter announced a bold change in SALT proposals, promised to pull all GIs out of South Korea, privately asked the West Germans to accept deployment of neutron weapons on their soil, pledged a unilateral ceiling on arms sales, urged total demilitarization of the Indian Ocean and placed human rights at the top of his foreign-policy concerns. All of these initiatives were soon either dropped or significantly modified. And the world got an image of US leadership as amateurish, vacillating and unpredictable.

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Reagan and his advisers came in determined to bolster what they viewed as an eroding balance of power; to pressure the Soviets into a less adventuresome foreign policy - especially after Afghanistan and in light of temptations to intervene in Poland and possibly Iran if that country starts to disintegrate politically; to come up with a better nuclear and arms-control strategy, and to restore US credibility and predictability.

It's too early to make sweeping assessments on success or failure. But some tentative judgments can be rendered in a number of specific arenas:

Soviet Union. Linkage is the keynote. The Administration is prepared to give Moscow a choice of either greater cooperation or a more confrontational America. But the US-Soviet relationship dominates everything. Whereas the Carter Administration saw the developing and Third World in terms of national aspirations and human rights, Reagan officials see them as ideological and strategic battlegrounds for the superpowers. Officials are guardedly hopeful about Soviet restraint in Poland, but are upset by what they say are near-record shipments of arms to Cuba and beyond to El Salvador and Nicaragua. The Administration, after it figures out its nuclear-weapons strategy, will probably come out with a radically different SALT proposal. Officials say, however, that they can manage better without a new agreement than with a bad one: if the Kremlin won't play ball, Haig will lay out details of the Administration's new position at a September meeting in New York with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko.

El Salvador. Administration analysts insist their reading of the intelligence convinced them that the Soviets and Cubans were pouring arms into El Salvador in an effort to install a Communist regime not favored by the majority of the nation's people. Had they not acted boldly, in words and actions, these analysts say, the new Administration's credibility to fend off threats in the Persian Gulf or anywhere in the world would have suffered. So they tended, mistakenly some now admit, to put almost total stress on weapons and not enough on political and economic remedies for the

underlying problems in El Salvador. Lately they have tried to shift to a more balanced approach there, as well as elsewhere in Central America and the Caribbean.

Poland. The Administration has tried to continue and strengthen the Carter Administration's approach, warning that a Soviet invasion would trigger very costly Western economic retaliation together with an even greater stepup in military budgets. Certainly these had to be among the factors weighed in Moscow. But the big question is to what extent Washington and its Western allies will, despite major budgetary constraints at home, dig into their pockets for the billions in assistance Poland will need if it is to have a chance to turn its economy around and thus preserve its bloodless revolution.

The Mideast and Persian Gulf. The Administration's twin aims have been to convince moderate Moslem states that the biggest threat to the region comes from the Kremlin and its proxies, and to persuade Israel to move toward a meaningful solution of the Palestinian problem on the West Bank. The Israeli air raids in Baghdad and Beirut, the re-election of Menachem Begin and the escalation of violence in Lebanon have complicated this strategy in fundamental ways. US planners are considering a modified approach to West Bank negotiations, to be discussed with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Begin when they visit Washington, Sadat today and Begin next month. They regard the sale of modern arms to Pakistan and sophisticated AWACS radar planes to Saudi Arabia, which has been playing a more assertive diplomatic role in the Lebanon crisis, as increasingly important in light of recent events in the region.

China. Reagan officials view China primarily in terms of a counterweight to the Soviet Union, the notion being that the pace and substance of the improving relationship between Washington and Peking can be influenced by whether Moscow reins in its aggressive foreign policy. Officials reluctantly see the need to downplay their friendship with Taiwan if they are to be able to play this "China card" effectively. At this juncture, there is no inclination to provide really sophisticated arms to Peking.

US allies. The Administration is attempting to convey an image of credibility and decisiveness while consulting more with the allies while policies are being formulated, as on the preparation for the talks on medium-range missiles in Europe. But more pressure will be placed than before on greater defense efforts by NATO and on Western allies providing less advanced technology to the Soviets.

Haig's star, while still under a cloud as far as some in the White House inner circle are concerned, appears to be rising in the eyes of the President.

James Baker wants a stronger National Security Council operation in the White House as a check on potential free-wheeling by Haig and the State Department. Meese still has doubts about Haig as a team player. But Reagan made sure Haig was out front on all foreign-policy issues at the recent Ottawa economic summit.

And when Haig complained bitterly to Allen and others about back-channel criticism against him and his policies by Robert Neumann, the ambassador to Saudi Arabia, the President agreed that Neumann had to go.

At the time, a little over a week ago, Reagan told aides on the Neumann matter that the Secretary of State must be able to have the final say on who should serve under him.

Then, according to one who was present, Reagan added a personal compliment designed to stop any backshooting at Haig: "As far as I am concerned, Al Haig has not yet made a mistake. Until he does, he'll continue to be the primary voice for foreign policy."

NEXT: The Reagan revolution in daily life.